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# THE SCHOOL REVIEW

A JOURNAL OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

VOLUME XIV  
NUMBER 7

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SEPTEMBER, 1906

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WHOLE  
NUMBER 137

## THE VITAL IN TEACHING SECONDARY ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>

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WILLIAM MORSE COLE  
South High School, Worcester, Mass.

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Though there are many disputed points in rhetoric, I believe one point about which all agree is the need of unity. Unless I can show you a unifying principle connecting our questions sent out in January with the main theme of our report today, I am sure that you will assert that we do not practice what we ought to preach. I am consequently forced into the rather unfortunate position of one who must offer you a whole system—a philosophy of the teaching of English, so to speak. This sounds alarming, I must admit; but my system, if I may use so portentous a word modestly, is extremely simple.

In another respect, too, I am placed in an unfortunate position. I expected to report upon other people's theories and methods; but the answers to my questions were so few that I have not much of the information that I expected to offer. A few persons answered my February questions carefully and freely, and to these persons I am extremely grateful. Their kindness is not the less appreciated for being rare. Some of them agree with what I am going to say, and some, at least in practice, appear to disagree. I hope both classes will make themselves heard in the discussion. In default of information about what others believe and practice, I am forced

<sup>1</sup>Read as a portion of the Report of the Committee on Methods before the New England Association of Teachers of English, March 1906.

back upon my own heresy; for heretic I think I must confess myself. What I have to propose is not, I believe, entirely new; but it is, I believe, seldom practiced. Otherwise I should have less reason for offering it to you. My only excuse is that to me it is so much *the* teaching of English, *par excellence*, that were it not so I should not be a teacher at all. In other words, this philosophy is with me, so far as my teaching is concerned, a life-and-death matter. You will then pardon any seeming exaggeration of its importance.

I fear I am one of the methodical people whose criterion for everything is largely the question whether the thing is worth while. Has the thing vitality? Has it any meaning for a human soul? If I cannot answer that question in the affirmative and find the relation of that thing to other things worth while, I confess I am not interested in the thing.

Before I apply the theory, I must make one preliminary proposition which to some will be heresy. It is this: So far as we of the secondary schools are teachers both of composition and of literature, we are teachers not of one subject, but of two. This will be made clear as I go on; but kindly remember that I am speaking not of colleges nor of elementary schools, but of high schools and, so far as conditions are the same, of private and endowed schools.

No method is of avail unless it bears relation to the conditions in which it must work. What, then, are our conditions? The average recitation group is made up of pupils of many types of intelligence, taste, refinement. It reflects the types around us. Our pupils embody all the phases of our conglomerate American life which we find hard in the first place to account for, and in the second place to reconcile to each other. Though our pupils are in "standing water," between childhood and maturity, we must not assume that we can therefore make of them whatever we will. They will turn out to be in the main what other pupils have turned out to be. Though perhaps they will be a trifle better, wiser, more skilful, and more appreciative, no revolution is to be looked for. In every hundred of our pupils, perhaps two will be professional writers, doing newspaper or hack work; the percentage of writers of literature is inconsiderable, of course. Perhaps ten in a hundred will have occasion a few times in their lives to write for publication: a doctor

or a scientist may publish a discovery or a report, a lawyer may find it desirable to present a plea to the public, and a minister may publish a volume of sermons (and I trust you realize that a sermon is not primarily a piece of writing, for a very good sermon to hear is often a very poor sermon to read). About forty in a hundred will write papers for missionary meetings or women's clubs, or reports for stockholders' meetings or governing bodies. The rest of the hundred, practically one-half the whole number, will write only letters—telling about Johnnie's mumps, or asking about Aunt Maria's new bonnet, or promising the shipment of certain goods, or fixing a price, or arranging a contract. If these statements seem to belittle our profession, ask yourself whether they are not true, and then be thoughtful and frank in your answer. I am not even belittling the importance of the letters that these people are to write, but I do wish to consider what are their needs in connection with the facts. Neither am I condemning these people to what you may call a narrow sphere. I am only saying that nature has made them that way—and though I cannot necessarily pick out the individual members of each class, the life around us shows that the facts will be those that I have indicated. Of course, we shall all agree that we cannot make writers of literature of any considerable percentage of our pupils. A writer of literature is always a poet—at heart—and the origin of poets is not now disputed. Yet I fear the assumption of a great deal of teaching of English has been that writers of literature could be made. Though the same truth with regard to hack writers holds in smaller degree, it still holds in kind.

What bearing has this upon our teaching of English? To my mind it is the fundamental consideration for any scheme of methods. Let us begin with composition.

The greatest good of the greatest number must be in any democratic scheme the end constantly held in view; but this does not involve disregarding the rights of any. Indeed, a slight wrong to one may be sometimes an evil worse than a slight wrong to many. Those who have in them the making of professional writers—even of writers of literature, however few they may be—make their rightful demands upon us, and to them we must acknowledge our duty. The duty is the more pressing for the rarity of the demand.

How, then, can we serve equally well the wants of such various classes? Only by making our instruction absolutely flexible. Individual instruction is of course the ideal, but it is not for us. We will not waste time talking about it. Yet even when we must take our pupils in classes of thirty or forty, we can make our instruction largely individual. This cannot be done, however, to accord with the plan of work laid down by most textbooks in rhetoric; and that is why I usually find such books objectionable.

What I shall offer today is a method of teaching practically without a textbook; for I believe our lack of flexibility is due largely to the fact that so many teachers abandon their classes to writers of textbooks who not only do not know the classes, but can at best teach only at long range. Work that one pupil is entirely unable to do, another finds so easy and obvious that it is not worth doing. Much of the work that most pupils can do will never serve many of them any useful purpose. Let me illustrate. Most pupils can, with sufficient instruction and drill, convert loose sentences into periodic, and *vice versa*; but if a pupil's feeling for language is so weak that only by long practice in making such conversions can he see the difference between the two kinds of sentences, seeing the difference will do him no good. In other words, to him the difference will never be vital, and he will never observe it unless a teacher is at his elbow to force him to do so. The same thing is true of the difference between weakness and force. Pupils who cannot without hours of drill comprehend and recognize the difference between weak sentences and forcible will get from the drill no good. In Miss Shute's report of four years ago she illustrated the principle admirably by the story of the boy who wrote "I have went home" as a notice to his teacher, for whom he had just written fifty times the sentence "I have gone home." For the average class, exercises on topic sentences, periodic, loose, and balanced sentences, weak and forcible sentences, unity of sentence structure, imaginative expressions, etc., etc., are but wasted energy. Pupils will write as they think; and most adolescents—like most adults—think loosely, weakly, incoherently. Such people can never write with discrimination. To be sure, the aim of education is to teach one to think accurately, and training in English is a part of that education; but to try, all

at once, by a process of drill in particular rules, to make a loose thinker accurate is to expect education to perform revolutions—and it does not work that way. Rules, to be effective, should not precede experience, but should grow out of it. The writing can never advance one step beyond the thinking, and to try by a sort of *tour de force* to get results without the evolutionary process is to get only artificiality and sham.

This is not saying, however, that periodic sentences, force, ease, unity of sentence structure, and such other devices and qualities, should be tabooed from the classroom. The best pupils have a right to know all we can tell about these things, and even the less keen should know what we mean by them. The practice, however, should not be to that end, but general; then, in criticism, the teacher can direct the attention of each pupil to such things as he can profit by.

Here, in a way, and as far as composition is concerned, is the heart of the system that I have to offer. Nothing should be written for a definite pedagogic purpose—with a prescribed end. All writing must have purpose, to be sure; but that purpose should appear not from prescription, but from results. I should hardly go so far as Mr. Thurber goes in his October pamphlet, however; for I do believe in requiring occasionally that a bit of writing shall be in the field of narrative, or of description, or what not—simply for assurance that each pupil shall try his hand in each field. Yet, even here, to assign a subject is usually to force our pupils either to be insincere or to write “an infinite deal of nothing.” I hardly know which is worse.

I dislike to be so heretical; but I can see, for me, no escape from my position. I am haunted always in teaching composition by the thought of purpose. Our aim should be always to help our pupils to do better the work that in after-life will be theirs—not someone's else work which they will not be called upon to do. If individual instruction is the ideal, the nearest practical approach to the ideal is absolute freedom of choice of subject and absolute freedom from arbitrary drill in the refinements of style. No one disputes that the way to learn to do a thing is by doing it. All the teacher can do is to help the pupil to see what without help he would not see. Many

things some pupils see without help; and some things other pupils will never see except in response to a stimulus applied by a teacher on each new occasion. Such application of stimuli is not worth while; for since the pupil will not have the stimulus when he gets out into the world, the teacher is wasting time in applying it in the school.

How does the teacher know what the pupil will respond to? He does not, usually. Here appears to be the danger of this free and easy system. The escape lies in the treatment of the themes after they are written. The logical conclusion of the matter is to read aloud and criticise before the class all themes written by it. The criticism should be based on the apparent need of the writer, and the best indication of that is the merit of the theme. An ungrammatical, wandering piece of work need not be criticised for weakness or for incoherence of sentence structure. The better the work, the more discriminating the suggestions of praise and censure. Thus each pupil is held always to a standard a little beyond that of his present accomplishment—a standard presumably attainable for him. In this way the teaching is apportioned among the various needs of the class in exactly the ratio of need. That is what I call the greatest good of the greatest number. Those who can rise to better things not only have before them the work of their superiors, but also have the benefit of the criticism which it calls forth. To be sure, the best writers may be bored by a criticism—perhaps repeated for the hundredth time—on the work of the poorest; but such is the penalty of greatness. They are less bored than both they and the poorest would be by drill that one group does not need and the other cannot profit by. Each group gets satisfaction of its needs in the proportion that its number bears to the total number.

Some teachers declare that they cannot find time for this theme-reading aloud. I should quite as much expect them to say that they cannot find time to read themes at all. The most profitable use of time can always be afforded. Of course, no class could endure for a whole class-hour the reading of themes on an assigned subject; but classes are always eager to listen to themes treated on the plan described, and they like to take part in the criticism.

It is obvious that the textbook on rhetoric or on composition has

under this plan fallen into the background; the teacher and the class take its place. Living people should have vitality such as no book can have. A textbook may say in vain that certain constructions are not clear or not forcible, but when a teacher and the listening class agree that in a specific case the writer has failed to make his point, the lesson is vital. There is still much that the textbook may do, however, for it may well, though not necessarily, furnish the exposition of what the teacher uses as a basis for his criticism, and it may furnish material for drill in grammatical correctness and in clearness—the only two matters in which I am willing to concede that drill, *per se*, is worth while. There, however, I believe that drill is even demanded. “There is no shuffling.” All pupils can learn to be grammatically correct and clear, and drill to that end may be and should be arbitrary and unsparing. If our pupils get anything else from the textbook or from us, let us attribute it to the grace of God, and be duly thankful. All that we have any reason to expect from the average pupil is that he will write with clearness and with something approaching force and unity, and that he will do so fairly in narrative, respectably in description, and comprehensibly in exposition and in argument.

A corollary to the general principle is a theory that no writing on literary subjects should be required primarily as composition. For purposes of test, much writing about books is no doubt necessary. Yet, though it is desirable often to stimulate pupils to have something to say about books, such things, I am convinced, should be said orally. Writing on any subject about which a pupil has been reading, or which he “reads up,” is sure to be influenced by that reading. “So much the better,” you will say, perhaps; and so far I agree with you; but when we place such tasks before our pupils, we incur one of two evils. If what the pupils have been reading is good, it is presumably better work than they themselves could do. Then to imitate, to copy words, phrases, whole sentences, arrangement, is to make the work better than it otherwise would be—a desirable thing for the work, but sapping to the moral fiber of the pupil. To avoid the words, phrases, sentences, and arrangement of the original is to strengthen the moral fiber of the pupil, but deliberately to make the work less good. Sometimes, indeed, a pupil



would naturally say the thing exactly as the author said it, but is deterred by fear of plagiarism. The result is bad morals to those who are weak in moral fiber, and bad English to those who are strong.

The same principle applies to writing in imitation. The greatest æsthetic fault of our age is imitation—we have imitation furniture, imitation silk, imitation fur, imitation morals, imitation art, imitation religion; and now, for fear that our pupils will not get enough in this mortal span, we force them into imitation literature. In their imitation literature they give sham thoughts to arouse sham emotions about sham things, and then we crow over the attainments of this sham education. If in any case we deny that all this is the result of imitation, I fear we ought to congratulate ourselves on the good fortune of the escape rather than on the excellence of the method. Few elements of our education are more depressing than the ease with which our pupils gather exalted notions of their own powers; and few things stimulate such notions more rapidly than the fancy that they can do this or that or some other thing by simply imitating someone else. Imitation practically never rings true.

I know that the inevitable example of Franklin's imitation of the *Spectator* is at the tongue's end of some of you. If Franklin's success in life was due to any one quality other than perseverance, was that quality not originality? If anyone ever could be trusted with imitation, that one was Franklin. He could imitate Addison and Steele by the hour, and then do something as unlike either as the *Ladies' Home Journal* is unlike the *Atlantic Monthly*—only, and here my simile fails, practically as good. It is to be remembered, moreover, that Franklin adopted the imitation method in default of any other. With him it was imitation or nothing. He had no teachers.

Only one more detail about composition do I wish to inflict upon you. I have never heard or read anything but condemnation for the teacher who does not require revision and rewriting of most written work. I must take this opportunity to protest. From the lower grades to college, most teachers bolster their pupils so that practically never is a child put to the test of what he as an individual, by his own power, on his own responsibility, can do. No air of finality attaches to anything he does. The consequence is our

prevailing national disgrace—lack of responsibility, in politics, in business, in morals, in society. A mite given toward the correction of this evil is absolute finality in every piece of work handed in. Revision and rewriting should come not after the teacher sees the work, but before; the benefit of criticism should show in future work. I have said nothing of the waste of human energy in useless copying, copying, copying. Our pupils unquestionably waste a great deal of their time; but do we teach them better by making them waste more? We ought rather to show them that life is so full of things worth while that a dozen lifetimes could all be profitably spent.

Let no one think because this system has no prescribed rules and devices that it is easy and therefore must be bad. It is difficult just because it is flexible. The class-hour requires the teacher to draw on all his resources, critical, constructive, and sympathetic; for he must realize that these themes are not only pieces of composition, but also reflections of the life and the thought of his pupils—crude attempts at literature—which should be considered as true or false to correct ideals of life.

We may now turn to the second phase of our work, the teaching of literature. So far as the make-up of our classes is concerned, we have to meet here quite as various conditions as in the teaching of composition. We have among our pupils those who appreciate practically nothing but salient narrative, those who also appreciate intellectual vigor, those who add spiritual appreciation, and finally those who absorb all good things. Here, then, as in the teaching of composition, our only criterion for determining what to do and what not to do is vitality—but vitality for the class rather than for the individual, though the individual must never be forgotten.

I am forced to believe that we who teach literature are in great danger of forgetting what literature really is. Just because we teach it, we get a distorted view of it. It is rather audacious, "in this presence," to hazard a definition of literature; but I must do it tentatively, at least, to make clear my point. Literature is the body of written truth about life. It is truth—and therefore no lie is literature. It is about life—and therefore it is all vital. My definition is adequate, however, only when taken less for what it denotes than for what it connotes. If anyone tells me that *The Ancient*

*Mariner*, though a lie, is literature, I shall answer that it is literature just because it is the truth. It expresses some of the profoundest truths of human nature—and not merely in the famous lines that some wish to call its moral: throughout its course it shows the psychology of sin as all of us have experienced it. If anyone tells me that Shelley's "The Cloud" is literature, though it does not deal with life, I shall answer that it is literature just because it is tingling with life. To read that poem is to feel anew what it is to live—though the cloud seems absolutely remote from human life. The fact is that no writing has ever endured as literature that is not a revelation of what life means—reflecting man's relation to man, or man's relation to nature, or man's relation to God. Again, no writing has ever endured as literature that has not in it the element of inspiration—of revelation, as I called it a moment ago. This revelation is nothing but the power to see and to express the vital element in life. Indeed, in that word "vital" is the whole secret. Literature is the vital way of writing vital things. If the thing is not vital, it is not life; and if the way is not vital, the truth is not wholly told.

Why, then, do we teach literature? Let us rather ask reverently whether we are fit to teach it. We, as teachers of literature, have more responsibility than any other group of men and women in the world. The biggest problem of modern times is that of learning how to live in this America—not how to get a living, but how to live so as to do and think and feel the things best worth while. At our elbows are young people looking out upon this big problem, and seeing it through an atmosphere tinged with—with what? With illusions, the illusions of heredity, and of environment, and—praised be God for it—of idealism. We have in our scrip the truth about life. Shall we share it with these precious souls, or shall we rather tell them that Macaulay was fond of hyperbole and of antithesis, that Shakespeare's later plays have more light endings than his earlier, and that Tennyson's *cæsura* was constantly shifting?

A realization of what will happen to these young people after they leave school only enforces the principle. Will most of them read for literary appreciation, or for life? All admit that we must teach them how to read. Shall we teach them to detect a false

accent and a faulty paragraph structure, or shall we teach them to detect false motives and faulty ambitions? Shall we enable them to distinguish pretense from reality, or is it better to show them the difference between the grand style and the halting?

Where, then, lies our duty? Perhaps it is not always easy to determine what our pupils need. We hear a great deal in these days about the commercial spirit. We probably all agree that we should make literature an antidote to that. Yet how shall it be done? The commercial spirit seems to most people to have the breath of life; hence an antidote that is not vital is vain. Unless, then, we can make our literature at least as much alive as commercialism, we are destined to failure. Commercialism is not our national disease; it is only the symptom of the disease. The commercial spirit sweeps all before it only when men fail to see the truth about life. For hundreds of years our literary leaders have been trying to show us the life of the spirit; but we have been talking of meters and metaphors and movement, until there is no health in us. I love the *Idylls of the King*, but when I am reading them I don't care a farthing whether the cæsura is after the first foot or in the middle of the fifth! Do you? To be frank, I'd usually rather not know where it is; and I respect the boy or the girl who resents the intrusion. If you should ask me why the life of the spirit is so little reflected from the literature of our race into the lives of the men and the women around us, I should answer in honesty that I fancy it is in part because for many years teachers of English have made loathsome some of the noblest sources of inspiration open to our time. Too much of our work has been devoted to collecting "facts for the curious," and too little to gathering inspiration for the struggles of life. It is true, moreover, that for all our pupils there is some vitality in the spiritual element in literature. I never met one so gross that he was dead to all spiritual truth. Yet for how many can vitality attach to verse formulæ, the rhyme scheme of a sonnet, Shakespeare's obligations to the law, or the identity of the mythological personages in Milton's *Lycidas*? The so-called literary study of literature has no place in a secondary school. All young people are eager to know about life. When they see that the greatest literature contains the most truth, they are interested;

when they see, too, that only a great style can express truth effectively, style takes on a new meaning to them; and then the factors of literary appreciation are at work. A suggestive question from the teacher will bring response from the responsive and will help them to see literary charm; but nothing will avail for the inert, and a quest in appreciation is not only fruitless, but profane. The technique of style should be relegated to such a background as it occupies in the mind of any sane educated person who is reading not analytically, but naturally.

Now let us bring this down to a definite practicable scheme. A lesson assignment in literature should be what? So far as I can make out, it should be nothing but the designation of a passage to be read—or possibly committed to memory. I find rather common, however, assignments with notice that particular lines are especially hard to understand, or particular allusions are especially important, or particular ideas are especially significant. Two fundamental objections to such assignments are obvious. First, attention is focused on special points at the expense of the whole; emphasis is placed often just where it does not belong, and other things shrink, in the student's mind, into subordination. The lesson then becomes a clinic, the text a subject for anatomical demonstration, and vitality is lost. The second objection is even more serious. To designate what pupils need especially to consider is to deprive them of both the pleasure and the benefit of a voyage of discovery. Nothing is more important in education than learning to recognize one's own difficulties and one's own needs. Never will an average pupil learn how to read without aid if he must at every turn encounter some question or suggestion projected into the study-hour by his teacher. If our aim were specific knowledge about particular books, no better method could be devised; but I conceive specific knowledge to be the one thing which our aim is not. What the pupil has missed should be brought out in the class discussion and should show him how better to do his next reading.

Here I must protest against what I call the encyclopædia habit. Not a quarter of the allusions in literature should be looked up. Allusions are to give pleasure. No man, unless he was a teacher of English, ever used an allusion with a desire that it should be hunted.

I believe every writer of literature would shudder at the thought of an encyclopædia at his reader's elbow. Shall we teach a method that violates the very spirit of all literature? "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." We all know the delight of a class in an allusion that touches a responsive chord; but we all know the shrinking at an allusion that brings only an echo. If we treat allusions as of importance *per se*, those that are meaningless are either impediments or points of departure for digressions. They should be passed, or explained by the teacher. It is far better to read two poems of Milton or two essays of Emerson and skip the allusions, than to read one poem or one essay and look up everything. The charm of allusion springs from the fountain of wide reading, but it never can be pumped up for the occasion. Wide reading, which we can encourage by rational treatment of literature, will create the fountain.

I can conceive of no method or program for the classroom hour. The English period may be as holy as a religious service, or as hilarious as a farce, or as cozy as a chat. It is a bit of life brought almost bodily into the room and unfolding itself before our eyes, and pausing, where necessary, for us to "look before and after, and pine for what is not." Nothing is better or more interesting for young people than free off-hand talk about life. For example, a class recently reading *Silas Marner* was discussing whether Nancy was ultimately happy or not. These questions flowed naturally one from another: Did she deserve to be happy? What is happiness? Had Nancy every wish satisfied except the longing for a child? Does an unsatisfied wish preclude happiness? Does anyone ever get satisfaction of all his wishes? If so, is that person necessarily happy?—Here was practically a whole philosophy of life unfolding itself before the class—not directed by the teacher, but merely suggested through the Socratic method. All our literature is full of such possibilities. There is more religion in Dolly Winthrop's philosophy of faith, as expounded to Silas Marner anent the casting of lots, than in ninety-five out of a hundred sermons, and it is worth a class-hour. The best part of this class work is that it engenders the habit of talking about serious things and overflows into the outside conversation of pupils.

This work cannot be done if an air of haste is allowed to creep into the classroom. Haste is fatal to all literary enjoyment. Not only in the class but in the study hour one must have time to stop and think. A book not worth thinking about is not worth reading. Lessons should be short enough to allow for an atmosphere of leisure. The aim of the teaching of literature, someone has wisely said, is "a state of mind." A class that was recently required to read *Henry Esmond* in five lessons must have been in a state of mind indeed! The reading lesson should never be a task. Though many things in education should be done chiefly because they are disagreeable, nothing should be made disagreeable in order that it may be done. If you approach literature as a task, a coldness has sprung up between you and it. It withdraws its charm into a more congenial atmosphere.

I cannot resist the desire to protest against squeamishness. As literature is the truth about life, it cannot ignore sex, the facts of sex, and the problems of sex—to use a much-abused expression in a perfectly normal way. A person who poses as a teacher and is afraid of sex in literature is only posing—he is not really a teacher. One never need be afraid of the truth—and here, you remember, is the difference between literature and trash: literature embodies the truth, but trash is full of less—or half-truths which are worse. There is nothing to slide over in Henry Esmond's irregular birth, nor in Hester Prynne's and Arthur Dimmesdale's *A*. I never found a modest girl or an honest boy who failed to take these things rightly when presented truly. Innocence is not ignorance of evil; it is freedom from the experience of evil—in deed, wish, or thought. The surest protection for innocence is a knowledge of the basic truth. Silence is often harmful, for it often leaves unrevealed the truth that should be made plain. I admit that, though I am not squeamish about the whole truth, I am afraid of the grossness of such things as *She Stoops to Conquer* and *Hallowe'en*. They are not quite the truth about life, for they are distorted; and righting them is not quite worth while. Most of all, I am afraid of a study of Burns which is squeamish about his irregularities and fails to show what they were—how they grew out of his nature, how they marred or destroyed others' happiness, how they blotted his poetry,

and how in tragedy they ended his life. In the whole story of Burns there is truth; but in even an expurgated *Hallowe'en*, without the story of his life, there is a lie.

The *sine qua non* of good teaching of literature, then, is a knowledge of life with power to reinforce or make concrete the truths which our best writers have told. The teacher is the interpreter between the concrete world of today and the spiritual truths of all time. Because of the immaturity of our pupils, it is the teacher's great privilege to supplement their experience with his own and make literature vital. The world is the teacher's field; no phase of life should be unknown to him, and where he can go without corrupting his own soul he should actually taste it. He has no right to be ignorant, and therefore his education is never complete. Science, history, architecture, sculpture, painting, music, the drama, philosophy, and religion, claim him. Successful preparation for a lesson is rather less in a careful study of the text than in broad and deep living. No other profession requires so much experience, so much feeling, so much tact.